

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM,  
VIOLENCE, AND U.S. POLICY IN NIGERIA

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Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

## USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Nury Turkel, Chair  
Abraham Cooper, Vice Chair  
David Curry  
Frederick A. Davie  
Stephen Schneck  
Eric Ueland  
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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR TURKEL: Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on Religious Freedom, Violence, and U.S. Policy in Nigeria.

I'd like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today and sharing their expertise.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or commonly known as USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the United States government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

For today's hearing, we'll be discussing the impact that instability and violence by non-

state actors is having on religious freedom conditions in Nigeria and how the United States government can adjust its policy approach to ameliorate the situation for religious or belief communities in the country.

Now I will turn the floor over to Vice Chair Cooper for his opening remarks.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you very much, Chair Turkel.

I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing.

In 2020, prior to my time on the Commission, I myself traveled to Nigeria to engage with religious communities there and learn about the challenges they face.

Most recently, in June of this year, USCIRF sent a delegation to Nigeria to conduct research on religious conditions there.

Nigeria is currently facing a myriad of security crises. Among the broader human rights ramifications of violence in Nigeria, some of this violence impacts the rights to freedom of religion

or belief.

For example, in some regions, militant Islamist groups in the course of their insurgencies conduct violence targeting non-Muslims, as well as Muslims who disagree with the group's interpretations of Islamic law and practice.

Identity-based violence at times manifests at the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and geographic heritage with certain ethno-religious groups being targeted as supposed "outsiders" or attacked for the land and social capital their group is perceived to possess.

"Mob justice," quote-unquote, has threatened individuals who express beliefs that others consider blasphemous. And across the country, as I heard directly from eyewitnesses and survivors, perpetrators target worshippers, sacred ceremonies, and religious leaders, and threaten those congregations' rights to worship collectively and in public, as protected under Nigerian and international law.

Today, we aim to not just discuss these

limitations on religious freedom in more detail, but to really get at the heart of what the U.S. government can and must do to help alleviate the situation for Nigerian faith and belief communities and ultimately improve religious freedom conditions in the country.

USCIRF consistently recommends that the State Department designate Nigeria a country of particular concern for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations.

We also call upon the United States government to appoint a Special Envoy to the Lake Chad region to prioritize a holistic approach to these issues and ensure the full weight of the U.S. government is centered on addressing them.

I'm very personally appreciative that these hearings are being convened and that we have the opportunity to hear directly from people in Nigeria as part of these hearings.

I now return the floor to Chair Turkel.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you, Vice Chair

Cooper.

Before we turn to our distinguished witnesses, I want to ask Commissioner Davie, who led the most recent USCIRF delegation to Nigeria this summer, to share some brief reflections from the visit to frame our discussion.

Commissioner Davie, the floor is yours.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Thank you, Chair Turkel, and thank you to everyone for joining our hearing today.

Discussing the religious freedom implications of violence in Nigeria is, needless to say, a mammoth task.

As we dive more deeply into the discussion, I want to frame the conversation with a few reflections from my June trip there, as Chair Turkel mentioned, where I spoke with a diverse variety of religious, civil society and government stakeholders.

First, in the tenuous Nigeria context that I think we all are aware of, religious minorities and individuals with dissenting beliefs or

interpretations are being forgotten or excluded from the religious freedom dialogue, or so it seems at least to me and to us based on the recent visit.

For example, few stakeholders we met with during that visit discussed the cases of humanist leader Mubarak Bala and Tijaniyya Muslim musician Yahaya Sharif Aminu.

USCIRF has highlighted these religious prisoners of conscience in our meetings, and actually I have adopted them as my religious prisoners of conscience in the USCIRF Religious Prisoners of Conscience program.

But we highlighted these religious prisoners of conscience in our meetings, yet they still remain relatively absent from Nigerians' discussion regarding freedom of religion or belief.

Both men are detained on charges of blasphemy for expressing their dissenting beliefs.

And so I employ all those fighting for freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria to remember that we cannot ignore or sacrifice those with minority or dissenting beliefs in our fight to

quell violence and religious freedom violations in the country—in Nigeria.

Nigeria must be safe for all religious and belief communities and be a country where religious freedom flourishes.

Second, it is important to note that it's not just freedom of religion or belief that is under attack in Nigeria, but many human rights protected under international law.

USCIRF focuses specifically on the right to freedom of religion or belief, but we recognize also that in Nigeria, as is often the case, violations of this right correspond with other types of human rights abuses and atrocity risk factors.

Today we've engaged a diverse array of experts to help us build a holistic approach to addressing the drivers of violence impacting religious freedom in Nigeria.

Finally, I want to highlight that one of the main findings from USCIRF's research delegation to Nigeria is that poor governance plays a major

role in driving violence and instability.

Many other people with whom we spoke from across Nigeria's religious spectrum reported that the Nigerian government could be doing more to address institutional failures and weaknesses that have led to a culture of poor security and judicial sector performance that then leads to impunity for violence, including violence against religious communities.

It is because of this violence, as well as the issues outlined by Vice Chair Cooper, that USCIRF has repeatedly recommended, most recently April 2022, that the State Department designate Nigeria as a country of particular concern, or a CPC, pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

We hope the State Department's list of CPC designations that is expected later this year will once again include Nigeria.

With these reflections I return the floor to Chair Turkel to introduce our witnesses.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you, Commissioner

Davie. Thank you very much. I really appreciate your leadership in our efforts to promote and protect vulnerable religious communities in Nigeria.

With that, I'd like to introduce our first witness for today's hearing. Ms. Oge Onubogu is the director of the West Africa Program at the U.S. Institute of Peace where she leads programming in Nigeria, Coastal West Africa, Lake Chad Basin, and Gulf of Guinea.

In her current position, she provides leadership and oversees the design and implementation of projects to mitigate violent conflict, promote inclusion and strengthen community-oriented security by partnering with policymakers, civic leaders and organizations.

She's also in the Public Leadership Credential program at Harvard Kennedy School.

Ms. Onubogu, you may begin your testimony.

MS. ONUBOGU: Thank you, Chairperson Turkel, Vice Chair Cooper, and Commissioner Davie, as well as members of the U.S. Commission on International

Religious Freedom.

Thank you for holding this hearing on Nigeria and for the work that the Commission is doing in ensuring a focus on human rights and religious freedoms around the world.

My name is Oge Onubogu. I am the director of the West Africa Program at the U.S. Institute of Peace. The U.S. Institute of Peace was established by Congress over 35 years ago as an independent, nonpartisan national institute to prevent and resolve violent conflicts abroad in accordance with U.S. national interests and values.

The U.S. Institute of Peace has been working in Nigeria for over a decade and has a country office in the capital city of Abuja.

USIP's work in Nigeria brings together state governors, national policymakers, and civic leaders to design and implement inclusive policies that mitigate violence and strengthen community-oriented security.

While my testimony today is informed by my work with the U.S. Institute of Peace, the opinions

and recommendations expressed are my own.

Nigeria's overlapping conflicts, including the insurgencies in the north, secessionist agitations in the south, and inter-communal violence, have killed thousands of people and displaced hundreds of thousands.

During the first half of 2022, insecurity intensified in Nigeria with an overall rise in violence targeting civilians around the country.

These ongoing crises, plus pervasive corruption and violent crime, are rooted in a disconnect between governance and citizens.

The surge in violence, criminality and other forms of insecurity since Nigeria's 2019 elections heightens the risk for the upcoming national and gubernatorial elections in Nigeria scheduled for February and March 2023 respectively.

This turmoil poses acute risk to Nigeria's election campaign season which officially begins today, September 28, for the presidential and National Assembly elections.

According to data collected by the Armed

Conflict Location and Event Data Project, ACLED, political violence by communal and ethnic militias and their violent activities targeting civilians constituted all incidents reported in Nigeria in the first half of this year, an increase when compared to the same period in 2021.

The escalation of political competition and political violence ahead of next year's elections cannot be understated.

The intersection of violence and political contests only sharpens the urgent imperative to strengthen the ability of Nigerians to resolve local conflicts nonviolently.

In Nigeria, religion intersects and interacts with ethnic identity, region, social class, and profession.

Nigeria's protracted violent conflicts between farmers and herders is an example of this complex intersection.

After 61 years of independence, Nigeria still struggles to cultivate a national identity rooted in people's basic freedoms and dignity.

Although Nigeria's constitution and other declarations of national purpose formally guarantee those freedoms and dignity, those promises are routinely held meaningless, often by the same state that is meant to uphold them.

Nigeria's political leader romanticize Nigeria's unity but do little to cultivate it. To the contrary, they often stoke ethnic and religious tensions, especially during election campaigns.

There is also violence in Nigeria with exclusively religious motivation, such as the recent occurrences of blasphemy killings. In May 2022, Deborah Yakubu, a college student, was killed by a mob in Sokoto state in northwest Nigeria, after being accused of blasphemy.

Addressing the increasing violence in Nigeria requires a nuanced understanding of its underlying intertwined drivers and the role of identity, including religion.

Given this complexity, it is important to understand when religion is used as a tool to mobilize violence and when violence is exclusively

motivated by religion.

In the context of Nigeria's unstable environment and the upcoming 2023 elections, incomplete information about the conflicts could risk policy program responses and public statements doing more damage by intensifying rather than deescalating the conflict.

Now it goes without saying that U.S. action to support Nigerian peacebuilding and atrocity prevention efforts is the right thing to do, and it is in our interests.

A U.S.-Nigeria partnership focused on honest dialogues that promotes peacebuilding amid conflict can help sow in Nigeria the vital conversations that will be a key source for real solutions.

To be clear, the United States cannot pretend to offer solutions as we have our own challenges, but it can change all practices that fail to advance dialogues that Nigerians can use to reverse the country's long and now dangerous slide into dysfunction.

Here are some recommendations that the U.S. government can and should do to support these efforts.

First, focus on accountable governance. Nigeria consistently moves from one violent conflict to another. The country's leaders and international partners, including the U.S., often become fixated on the latest manifestation of insecurity.

The larger problem, however, is that none of this will ever change unless the focus turns more firmly and consistently to the thread that runs through all of these crises: the failures of governance.

A common thread underlying many of Nigeria's most pressing problems and violent conflicts is a failure of governance, a disconnect between government and citizens.

There is a need to reinvigorate and sustain the focus on getting governance right. That means ensuring better mechanisms of accountability for top government officials and

reducing corruption and other abuses that fuel violent conflict.

Second, timely, constructive and consistent support to the 2023 elections and the political transitions to come. Nigeria is only a few months away from elections that could strengthen or set back its democracy.

On the positive, there is a surge in voter registration and a wave of civic engagement among young and new voters who in recent years have often been despaired of better governance through elections.

Still, that very frustration and a demand for change combined with tenacious campaigns by existing political parties to hold on to or retake power, and the already volatile tensions across the country, also risk electoral violence that could dash hopes and fuel greater outrage.

The U.S. government already provides robust technical support to Nigeria for elections, but political support is equally crucial. The coming months offers opportunities.

President Buhari just attended the U.N. General Assembly meetings this month, and we can presume that he will also attend the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit scheduled for December.

U.S. diplomats should emphasize to him and the Nigerian government the importance of maintaining his pledge of guaranteeing elections that carry the prospects of another commendable milestone in Nigeria's democratic development.

Third, prioritize local peacebuilding and atrocity prevention programs. Violent conflicts in Nigeria have been driven mainly by local and state level disputes rather than by nationwide divisions.

The history that magnifies the importance of local level peacebuilding. Like any other peacebuilding initiative, these engagements must be shaped by detailed understanding of how different communities in Nigeria perceive conflicts and also understand peace in their communities.

Fourth, work more with Nigeria's states. Nigeria's 36 states hold significant power in the country, and they also warrant specific attention.

America should decentralize its engagement with Nigeria by strengthening its dialogues and engagements at the state level with local governments and with civic leaders at the local levels.

Shifting America's partnership more towards Nigeria's states is vital to the work of ending Nigeria's dozens of armed communal conflicts.

Finally, pursue constructive and honest partnership. U.S. engagement must center more on Nigeria's citizens, notably the 70 percent who are younger than 35. America's engagement with Nigeria's citizens, America's engagement with Nigeria is often with its centers of power, the states and institutions and corporations that dominate Nigeria's oil production and its financial industry.

But real engagement requires Americans and others to now see that there are two Nigerias. There is a deep divide between the country's power centers and the capital cities and the more--and

the one hundred, and the other citizens, many who are younger than 35.

There needs to be a more open and focused dialogue with this more youthful population. Neither the United States nor any other partner can truly help Nigeria recover from its decline unless there is a focused and energetic engagement with this group of Nigerians.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Ms. Onubogu.

Now we will ask our next witness, Dr. Olusola Isola, to provide his testimony. Dr. Isola is a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies at University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

He was the Spring 2018 Visiting African Peacebuilding Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington.

He holds Ph.D. in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of Ibadan.

With that, I'd like to ask you to begin your testimony, Dr. Isola.

DR. ISOLA: [Technical difficulties.]

[Pause.]

CHAIR TURKEL: Looks like we're having technical difficulties.

Dr. Isola's testimony, written testimony, will be available on our website after the hearing. I invite participants to go and read it.

Now, we're going to move on to our next witness, Mr. Emmanuel Ogbudu.

Mr. Ogbudu is a humanitarian and development expert with nine years of experience providing technical expertise to multi-million dollar donor-funded projects.

He's currently the Senior Monitoring, Evaluating and Learning Manager for the Community Initiatives to Promote Peace Activity with Mercy Corps in Nigeria.

Mr. Ogbudu, you may begin your testimony.

MR. OGBUDU: Thank you very much.

Writing on the existing protocol, the

testimony I'm going to present today is based on the key findings and implications from Mercy Corps report titled "Fear of the Unknown," which I co-authored with Adam Lichtenheld, who is now based at Stanford University.

This study was motivated by recent trends in intercommunal conflicts in northern Nigeria. In recent years, commentators have increasingly highlighted the religious dimensions of intercommunal conflict, suggesting that this violence is religiously motivated.

Other commentators have de-emphasized the role of religion and instead characterize this conflict as a consequence of increased banditry and growing resource competition.

To help fill the evidence gaps at the heart of these debates, we posed three core questions, which, first, what are the main drivers and motivation for violence in north central and northwest Nigeria?

Second, what are the specific processes by which religion catalyzes violent conflict?

And third, what mechanisms have communities used to prevent violence and mitigate religious tensions?

To answer these questions, we drew on multiple quantitative and qualitative data sources. To examine broad patterns and trends in violence, we analyzed three different sources of violent events data in 12 states in North Central and Northwest Nigeria over the past ten years.

Oge Onubogu has talked about the ACLED. We referred to the ACLED data, the Council on Foreign Relations, and Nigeria Watch.

We complemented this analysis of violent events data with two phases of field research in Kano state and Kaduna state respectively.

The first phase, we used 165 in-depth interviews with key informants and local community members in both states to capture qualitative insights into conflict dynamics, processes, and pathways to violence.

The second phase of the field research used a survey of 750 residents in 15 communities

across the two states to quantitatively evaluate the factors associated with individuals' support for and willingness to participate in violence.

In this testimony, I want to highlight four key findings from our report that are relevant to the core aims of this hearing.

Our first key finding is that only some violence has been inter-religious in nature, and Muslims and Christians have been both perpetrators and victims.

Analysis of data from ACLED, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Nigeria Watch indicate that from 2011 to 2020, only nine percent of attacks explicitly targeted or were carried out by religious groups, and only ten percent of fatalities were ascribed to conflicts over a religious issue.

This finding from the violent events database is supported by our survey data, in which a majority of Muslim and Christian survey respondents said that members of both faiths are responsible for violence in their area, as opposed

to pinning blame solely on one side.

Our second key finding is rather than being driven by religious belief or hatred, violence that falls along religious lines is typically a consequence of insecurity and a lack of social cohesion between ethno-religious groups.

Our survey data shows that the more religious people are, the less likely they are to support or engage in violence, and this holds across both Muslim and Christian faith.

Instead, we found that insecurity and weakened social cohesion combine to lead to violence. An increase in perceived insecurity corresponds with a 25 to 35 percent increase in respondents' support for the use of violence and their willingness to engage in it.

Meanwhile, a decrease in social cohesion, including intergroup trust, is associated with a 43 to 60 percent increase in respondents' willingness to endorse violence.

This dynamic was echoed in our qualitative interview, including by a community leader, who

described this pattern saying "I call it 'fear of the unknown' because people know that they can be attacked if there is a crisis."

Our third key finding is that while we did not find that religious belief or hatred is a root cause of violence, we did find evidence that religious identities provide opportunities and motivation for both elites and ordinary individuals to mobilize violence.

I will briefly illustrate both of these pathways of mobilization through direct quotes from our qualitative interviews.

The first pathway is that political and religious leaders intentionally politicize or enhance the salience of religious identity to spur people to action, particularly around elections, which create windows of vulnerability by raising the potential for shift in power between groups.

An interviewee in Kano state described this saying, "It is a known fact that people are very religious so if you want to win a Kano man over, use religion as a cover. This is what most

of our leaders are using against us. Using religion as a tool to stir up conflict.”

The second pathway is that members of the public make solidarity claims to co-ethnics or co-religionists to garner support in a quarrel, which can allow interpersonal disputes to escalate into conflicts between identity groups.

An interviewee described this pattern, saying “conflict starts with something as little as misunderstanding between two people of the opposite religion, but later turns into religious violence so the perpetrators can get backup.”

Our fourth key finding is that although we find that religious leaders can amplify conflict, they can also be custodians of peace.

So the analysis in our report shows that survey respondents who say that religious leaders help resolve disputes in their area are significantly less likely to support violence.

This finding holds no matter how often people say that religious leaders are actually successful in resolving disputes.

I will close by highlighting two sets of recommendations that follow from these findings:

First, we recommend a shift in how we think and talk about conflict across religious divides away from the picture of a "clash of civilizations" that is a root cause of violence towards an appreciation of the role of religion as a potential catalyst and mobilizer that interacts with other root causes and is deployed strategically by both mass and elite actors.

Second, this shift in mindset and framing leads us to recommend a set of specific programming interventions to address intercommunal conflict in northern Nigeria.

This includes interventions that focus on preventing the escalation of disputes into violence by training religious leaders and other local leaders in negotiation and dispute resolution, by strengthening local early warning systems, so that trained local leaders can intervene before disputes escalate, and by paying specific attention to windows of risk, such as elections.

We also recommend interventions that address key root causes of violence by strengthening inter-group interactions and trust, especially around natural resource management, and interventions that address governance shortcomings by increasing the effectiveness and accountability of security and service provision.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much for your testimony.

I'd like to give Dr. Isola one more chance to see if he can join us. I see him in the program. He had some technical difficulties.

Dr. Isola, can you, are you in a situation to provide your testimony or are you still experiencing technical difficulty?

DR. ISOLA: Yes, I'm connected now. If you can hear.

CHAIR TURKEL: We can hear you. You may proceed.

DR. ISOLA: Can you hear me? Okay. Thank you, chair and honorable commissioners. I thank

you for the privilege of making this presentation on Religion and Politics in Nigeria-[?]

[Technical difficulties interfere throughout presentation. Notations indicated by [?] show when the connection failed and words are missing.]

DR. ISOLA: In order to sustain the peaceful coexistence among the various religions, the independent and post-independent should be a secular state with none of the religions taking precedence or favored over the others by the government.

In essence, there should be no state religion and state affairs should be separated from religion.

This principle was sustained by subsequent governments and even the various military administrations that ruled strictly separated [?].

CHAIR TURKEL: Dr. Isola, you may want to just turn off your camera. Dr. Isola, you may want to turn off your camera so that you may have a more stable connection.

DR. ISOLA: Okay. The media published reports of religious conflicts and give accounts of their dimensions. However, in the recent years, the activities of the media in terms of insensitive reporting of religious conflicts have been noticed to have aggravated religious violence in Nigeria.

In addition, the mixture of politics with religion appears to have complicated the religious complexities and amplifies religious conflicts in the country.

Insensitive reporting of religious conflicts has led to spreading of such conflicts to other parts of the country, you know.

Politicians, in their quest to cultivate support from the electorate, often mobilize the religious sentiments of voters, in the process whipping up negative sentiments among the diverse population.

This sometimes leads to antagonism among the diverse religious adherents leading to violent conflicts among the adherents of dominant- [?].

CHAIR TURKEL: Dr. Isola, you may want to

wrap it up. We are having serious technical issues here. Dr. Isola, I'd like to ask you to wrap up so we can move on to the next--

DR. ISOLA: On the part of the media, being a platform for political rhetoric to the diverse publics, they sometimes [?].

Okay. Let me quickly wrap up. U.S. government can help in implementing in order to forestall religious- [?].

CHAIR TURKEL: Dr. Isola, thank you very much for your testimony.

We would like to move on to our next.

DR. ISOLA: All right.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much for your testimony. I'd like to move on to our next, our final witness, Mr. James Barnett.

Mr. Barnett is a researcher, journalist, and consultant based in Lagos, Nigeria, and he's also a non-resident fellow at the Hudson Institute here in Washington, D.C.

His work covers conflict, terrorism, and geopolitics, primarily in Africa.

Prior to joining Hudson, Mr. Barnett held research and analyst positions with the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, and the American Enterprise Institute's "Critical Threats Project."

Mr. Barnett, you may begin your testimony.

MR. BARNETT: Thank you very much. Good day, all. I thank Chair Turkel, Vice Chair Cooper, and Commissioner Davie for hosting this hearing, and I thank my three distinguished colleagues for their testimony so far, which I found very enlightening.

I'm grateful for the opportunity today to speak on these important topics regarding security, social cohesion and religious freedom in Nigeria.

And I wish to note from the onset that the views I express are my own and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of any of the organizations with which I am affiliated.

That said, I am indebted to several of those organizations and my colleagues therein for facilitating this research upon which this

testimony is based.

So in the interest of time, I will bridge the written testimony that I've submitted and narrow the focus of my oral testimony to discuss some of the drivers of terrorism in Nigeria and particularly two sets of militants that have been officially designated by the Nigerian government as terrorists and are sometimes conflated in Nigeria as political discourse.

On the one hand, there are Salafi-jihadist militants that have historically operated in Nigeria's northeast, namely, the Boko Haram group and its two offshoots, the now stronger Islamic State in West Africa Province, or ISWAP, and the al-Qaeda linked Ansaru.

And then on the other hand, I will talk about the militants known colloquially as bandits, who have terrorized large swaths of northern Nigeria and north central Nigeria in recent years.

I conducted extensive research across northwestern Zamfara and northeastern Nigeria to form the basis of this testimony, and this includes

both affected communities, state actors, but also non-state actors in the northwest, as well as former jihadists who have defected and gone through the Nigerian government's deradicalization process to talk a bit about the motivations of the violent extremist groups to which they previously belonged.

To give the bottom line up-front, Nigeria's jihadists and bandits are both incredibly deadly and to be quite indiscriminate in their violence against civilians.

But their motivations differ in notable ways. While jihadists are waging an ideological struggle rooted in an extreme and fringe religious ideology, Nigeria's bandits are mostly motivated by a combination of personal ambitions and grievances, stemming from inter-ethnic conflict rooted in land use disputes [?].

In contrast to jihadists, bandits do not generally target civilians on the basis of religion but in some ways are even more indiscriminate than the primary jihadist groups that are operating in Nigeria today.

I think it's worth explaining very briefly

what I mean by bandits because it's a very vague term. Nigeria's bandits are very difficult subset of militants to define, and even the term "banditry" has some different geographic connotations within Nigeria, which Nigerians from different parts of the country using the term somewhat differently.

For the purpose of this discussion, I'm focusing on northwestern Nigeria, in which I would define bandits as rural gangs that engage in criminal activities such as cattle rustling, extorting, looting the villages and kidnapping for ransom, increasingly on a mass scale.

Most bandits in the region, but not all, are ethnic Fulani pastoralists who claim to have taken up arms in protest of the government's mistreatment and neglect of herds.

While many bandits first turned to militancy with genuine grievances, they have since developed a more criminal modus operandi. Rather than uniting to fight against the Nigerian government, the bandits in the northwest primarily attack ordinary villagers and travelers and feud with rival gangs in their pursuit of

wealth, power and notoriety.

Notably, I really want to impress the point, because I think sometimes the phrase "bandit" itself might come across as an understatement, there are thousands, possibly even tens of thousands, of bandits spread across dozens of gangs in northwestern Nigeria, and they are so well armed that they have become deadlier than many jihadists.

Now a popular narrative has emerged in many parts of Nigerian society that the jihadists and bandits are essentially two sides of the same coin, the bandits being northern Muslims and particularly being ethnic Fulani are motivated by a radical religious ideology similar to Boko Haram's.

The reality is much more complex. Jihadists and bandits are organizationally, ideologically, and to an extent, ethnically distinct movements within Nigerian context.

While jihadists are absolutely motivated by extreme religious ideology, for the bandits, it's ethnicity and the political economy of warlordism that play a much larger role in fueling the violence in that

region.

The bandits are themselves mostly Sunni Muslim though they generally demonstrate little interest in religious observance, and, unlike jihadists, frequently engage in "un-Islamic activities," in quotes, and vices such as drugs or alcohol.

Their primary antagonists, at least as they tell it, are the Nigerian state and, in the northwest, ethnic Hausa farming communities, as these are the communities that Fulani have come into conflict with over the past 20 years amid heightened and increasingly ethnicized farmer-herder conflict.

Therefore, in their pursuit of political legitimacy, bandits, and especially the most powerful bandits, who I often refer to as bandit warlords, attack farming communities, and specifically Hausa communities or other ethnic groups to bolster their claims to be fighting in the name of the Fulani ethnic group even though I should add that many bandits also rob and kill Fulani in their pursuit of wealth and power.

The bandits do not seem to care much about the faith of their victims. When bandits operate in Christian areas, they kill and kidnap Christians, but in states such as Zamfara, Sokoto and Katsina, where the bandits are the most powerful, and where the banditry related violence is most intense, the bandits are ethnic Hausa, a Muslim majority ethnic group.

To take one example, Kaduna state exemplifies the complex dynamics of banditry and religion in Nigeria. In southern regions of the state such as local governments, such as Zangon Kataf, where Christians are the majority, it is definitely the case that there is banditry, kidnapping, arson and these crimes, and that Christians form the majority of the victims.

However, within the very same state, if you move into the western or central areas into local governments that are predominantly Muslims, such as Birnin Gwari or more mixed, such as Chikun government, there too you will have the same types of banditry and very often even the same gangs conducting the same types of attacks.

In sum, the bandits have a very different modus operandi than jihadists. In fact, while Jihadists have attempted to recruit bandits to their ideological cause on numerous occasions over the past decade, two of my colleagues and I show in a detailed fieldwork study that was published earlier this year, the bandits have usually been resistant to the overtures of jihadists, and in the question and answer session, I'm happy to talk a bit about why that is, why the bandits and jihadists have not cooperated and converged as much as one might think.

Now, before concluding my remarks, I'd like to briefly touch on the Nigerian government's response to both jihadists and bandit terrorism, something that I deal with a bit more in the written testimony.

A suspicious or a conspiratorial narrative has gained traction in certain segments of Nigerian society that the federal government under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari, who is himself a Fulani Muslim from the northwest, is turning a blind eye to, or perhaps even actively aiding, bandits and jihadists as they overrun Christian parts

of Nigeria in an effort to Islamize the country.

In my own research, I find little evidence to support these theories, which I have seen are often employed for political gain. However, this does not mean the Nigerian government has fulfilled its obligations to its citizenry.

On the contrary, the narrative that the government is failing to protect Christians from slaughter, while true, is incomplete for the very tragic reasons that Muslims are also being slaughtered on a daily basis: civilians, whether Muslim or Christian, bear the brunt of violence in northern Nigeria, especially these days in the northwest, where the bandits tend to go for softer targets, attacking unarmed villagers or travelers, rather than confronting security forces head on.

I would therefore recommend to the Commission that in looking for ways to improve security, religious freedom and social cohesion in Nigeria, we must be [?] to the local nuance intercommunal conflict that vary greatly across the country of 200 million people.

That's very important rather than reducing

Nigeria's complexity to a single narrative.

I would conclude this testimony with one recommendation, particularly regarding the situation of banditry in the northwest. U.S. government should do what it can, within reason, to push its partners at the various levels of Nigerian state and society to develop a more coordinated and coherent approach to addressing banditry, terrorism and kidnapping in the northwest.

Compared to northeastern Nigeria, there is far more policy dissonance within the northwest between the local, state and federal authorities when it comes to this issue of banditry.

In general, local and state authorities have proven to be more interested in pursuing non-kinetic options, seeing this crisis as one rooted intercommunal violence and seeing the bandits essentially as political actors that for better or worse have a degree of political constituency you can say.

The federal government, on the other hand, has taken an increasingly militarized response to the conflict in the northwest, seeing the bandits as originally criminals and now increasingly as

terrorists, which while no denying that their violence is increasingly terroristic, the federal government's policy approach ends up not only being intentioned with that of the state and local authorities but they can indeed prove to be very counterproductive, as has been the case on multiple occasions.

And, unfortunately, it is Nigerian civilians, first and foremost, who suffer the consequences of failed or incomplete policies in Nigeria.

With that in mind, this is the one key area where I would recommend that the United States can nudge Nigeria in the right direction. That is in pushing for greater policy coordination and coherence on these issues of security in the northwest.

I thank you very much for this opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Mr. Barnett, for your compelling testimony.

I'd like to recognize myself for the first line of questions. I'd like to go to Ms. Onubogu if I may.

Ms. Onubogu, you have highlighted the role

poor governance has played in driving much of the violence that threatens religious freedom in Nigeria today.

Could you say a little bit more about which actors in the Nigerian government are failing to live up to their duties and if so why?

And what are the main points of leverage that the United States government might prioritize to incentivize these actors to improve governance?

And, finally, why do you think that Nigeria is absent from the United States atrocity prevention policy and what can we do to rectify this?

MS. ONUBOGU: Thank you, Chairperson Turkel, for your question.

I will start with the last point that you, the last question. I am not an expert on atrocity issues so I can come back to you with a response on that.

But on your first question on the governance issue, I think Nigeria has had a long history of poor governance, and this is a very complex situation, and we often see spikes in violent activity or political

violence as we come into the election season, as we're beginning to see a significant spike as we head towards elections, really significant high-stakes elections in Nigeria in 2023.

I think consistent engagement by the U.S. government and other international partners of Nigeria is key, ensuring that we are looking at strengthening institutions of governance and not solely building partnerships with individuals alone, but strengthening the institutions of governance to ensure sustainability.

These are institutions of governance from the security side so the justice side to accountability because time and time again the concerns we hear from citizens are about the problems of impunity.

For many citizens at the community level, it is clear to many of them who the actors or the perpetrators are in this violence, and when the violence continues and folks are not being held accountable, victims themselves can also end up becoming perpetrators because it only continues to fuel the cycle of violence when no one is held accountable.

So strengthening the institutions of accountability is key. Strengthening justice and security sectors are key. And when I talk about security sector, it's not only train and equip programs. It's really building and strengthening those institutions that can remain sustainable and that are connected to the communities.

One of the examples that I put down on the table is to really think about how we engage or how the U.S. government engages at the state level in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a federal system with 36 different states, and these are state governments. And these states are run by state governors that in many instances are almost as powerful as the president and also oversee budgets, in some instances, that are larger than the budgets of some countries in West Africa.

So it is important to think about how we engage constructively at the state level because we consistently see violence in Nigeria emerging. Violence emerges at the state level, at the local level, and when it's not managed properly there, it

blows up into something national and regional as we've seen in the case of Boko Haram.

One of the interventions that USIP has been carrying on for the last couple of years is working at the state level to strengthen state peacebuilding institutions and state peacebuilding commissions because these are closer to the communities, and they are able to work hand-in-hand with communities and the state governments to address issues as they arise.

Now a lot of work still needs to be done in institutionalizing peacebuilding and ensuring that it is something that is looked at as a part of the governance system and not just an activity.

And I think most importantly it needs to be owned by the Nigerian people and also owned by the Nigerian state as well.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

Now I would like to recognize Vice Chair Cooper for questions or comments.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Chair Turkel.

And I want to thank and commend the testimonies this morning. I learned a great deal to

expand and further complicate, but in a positive way, our need to do what we can from our end.

My question is Nigeria is a huge target from the outside as well. It's the largest country in Africa. It's the richest.

Can any of the individuals today who are testifying, could you list some of the terrorist groups both inside and outside the country, and which of them invoke religion either as a strategy or as a core motivator of their own activities?

Thank you.

MS. ONUBOGU: I was about to defer to James Barnett just to get some information from the research that he's conducting on these issues.

MR. BARNETT: Thank you.

I cut out for two minutes, I think exactly as whoever was asking the question asked it. So would you be so kind as to repeat it, please?

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Sure. Sure. It was good timing.

So Nigeria obviously is the largest and the richest country in Africa. It's also a huge target for

terrorists. Could you give us an idea of which terrorist groups operate inside Nigeria? Which are influencing from outside?

And also which of these groups invoke religion or theology as either a tactic, a strategy, or as their so-called, if you will, core motivator or value?

MR. BARNETT: Thank you very much, Vice Chair Cooper. That's a great question.

I think that those groups from Salafi-jihadist terror groups, and as I noted, and I'll elaborate here, there are three primary terror, Salafi-jihadist groups operating in [?]. So there's the original Boko Haram movement, which started as a mass preaching movement in the northeast in the 2000s, and was kind of tapping into what was [?] this feeling that Islamic law could bring new kind of [?] and deal with issues of corruption in northern states, in the 2000s.

This is in the first decade of the democratic rule.

And then in 2009, Boko Haram transformed

permanently into a very violent insurgency, and especially after the killing of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, by the Nigerian authorities in 2009. The successor to Yusuf, the infamous terrorist, Abubakar Shekau, launched one of the bloodiest insurgencies on the continent and one of the bloodiest jihadist insurgencies anywhere in the world.

Shekau, what set him apart from even other jihadist terror groups was that he had a very exclusive, very radical interpretation of the concept of takfir, this idea of one Muslim declare another Muslim apostate, such that in Shekau's mind, even vast majority of Muslim citizens from Nigeria by virtue of [?] were apostates and were therefore kind of target for violence.

And so [?] within the global jihadist community for bombing mosques, for killing lots of Muslims, and this is, of course, not to deny the fact that they also engaged [?] 2014 in widespread campaigns against Christians, particularly in northern Nigeria with some very brutal attacks.

Both Boko Haram's and Shekau's ideology and

strategy was so kind of radical that there were lots of dissenters within the group. So originally in roughly 2012, you had Ansaru group that had some backing from al-Qaeda, specifically al-Qaeda and the Islamic Maghreb. So that's the jihadist based more in North Africa and the Sahel. It afforded this kind of splinter [?] on the understanding that Shekau [?]. Sorry. That Shekau was too radical and that his leadership style was very erratic.

So the [?] group, while smaller than Boko Haram, engaged in a number of high-profile attacks, particularly kidnappings of Western expatriates in northern Nigeria in roughly [?], but by the mid-2010s, they were kind of done away with for now.

And then ISWAP formed in 2015 and 2016, which is now actually the most powerful jihadist group in Nigeria. And so that's where you have the main fracturing of Boko Haram with a number of commanders who have been skeptical of Shekau's leadership and ideology essentially getting the blessing from the Islamic State who was saying, you know, this was, of course, the Islamic—one of the most brutal terrorist

groups in the world—saying Shekau is too erratic. You can't rely on him, and so you guys should, you know, form your own group and you will have our formal backing and designation as a province within the [?].

And so fast-forward about six years. Today, it's that Islamic State Province, ISWAP, that is the strongest province, probably one of the strongest jihadist groups in Africa today.

If we look at it, they're kind [?], if you look at the degree to which they've been able to kind of [?] in the hinterlands and the rural communities in northeastern Nigeria, as well as [?] Niger and [?].

And so I would say then today ISWAP is the strongest and most dangerous terror group [?]. That said, you will have some elements of Boko Haram [?], and I say some elements because it's difficult to know kind of what the leadership structure of Boko Haram is today.

Abubakar Shekau was killed in May 2021 in clashes with ISWAP, and he doesn't have a clear successor.

One of the areas where it gets complicated is

that in the northeast, there is a group, what's called the [?] that has kind of claimed the mantle of being the successor to Shekau, and it's operating still in the Lake Chad area, and there has been some on-again/off-again fighting with the ISWAP faction for [?] even though the [?] is much smaller.

But what my own research on the northwest has shown is that a lot of Boko Haram guys, before Shekau's death in 2021, a lot of Boko Haram fighters had actually started migrating to the northwest [?] states and kind of setting up camp in smaller cells in rural areas, and that they were conducting a lot of attacks that may be, you know, at the surface, they could kind of look a lot like the local banditry, and they weren't necessarily claiming these attacks in comparison to say ISWAP, which tends to, you know, to publicize its operations through the Islamic State media network.

So I think that today there are actually probably a lot of Boko Haram guys roaming around different parts of the northwest and north central, and, you know, there are certain commanders who are kind of rumored or reported to be, you know, the

leaders of these Boko Haram guys in that region.

But it's hard to know to what extent they're operating kind of a unified insurgency versus is it more kind of smaller cells, you know, conducting their own attacks in their own areas.

That said, some of these Boko Haram guys were behind a large, a kind of high-profile kidnapping of [?].

CHAIR TURKEL: Mr. Barnett, thank you so much. It seems like you're having technical difficulties.

MR. BARNETT: [?] 60 passenger aircraft from Abuja to the state capital of Kaduna in March of this year.

Oh, sorry.

CHAIR TURKEL: That's okay.

MR. BARNETT: I'll stop now then.

CHAIR TURKEL: That's okay. That's okay.

I wanted to thank the commissioners patiently waiting for an opportunity to comment and ask questions. If I may, I'd like to go to Commissioner Frank Wolf for comments or questions.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I appreciate it. And I want to thank the witnesses.

I have a couple of questions, but I'll try to be really brief, and whoever wants to answer this is appropriate.

In a May 31, 2021 article in Foreign Affairs magazine, titled "The Giant of Africa is Failing." Former Ambassador John Campbell and Robert Rotberg said, quote, the following: "State failure in Nigeria is having profound consequences for the entire region and beyond. It bodes especially ill for the stability and well-being of weak states in Nigeria's vicinity, as evidenced by the spread of jihad and criminal groups to Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Ivory Coast, Mali, and Niger."

What impact is what's taking place in Nigeria having in the surrounding Lake Chad region?

CHAIR TURKEL: Anyone want to comment?

MS. ONUBOGU: Sure, I can comment. I can comment on this.

Thank you, Commissioner Wolf, for your

question.

Obviously, I think there is a saying that goes that when Nigeria, what happens in Nigeria impacts the entire region. When Nigeria sneezes, West Africa catches a cold.

So you're basically looking at a country where when there are conflicts, when there are concerns like this, it has regional implications, and I think it's also important in the approach that we take, that the U.S. government takes, and other partners working in Nigeria should take, as they look at violent conflicts in the country, understanding that this is something that has regional ramifications, and it also needs a collected approach in trying to resolve, in trying to resolve it.

We've seen the conflicts. We've seen the Boko Haram conflicts, as I mentioned earlier, conflicts that started at a local level, a local level, have blown up to have more national and regional implications.

And along those lines, too, as well, as we think about how we approach these issues is also

thinking about the Nigerian elections, as they come up in 2023.

The risk for violence is high. These elections are going to be happening in an environment where in a very complex security environment compared to what we saw in 2019 or in 2015. And the stakes are much higher now.

And depending on the outcome of those elections, the outcome of those elections could have, there could be implications for the region. If those elections go well, the implications for what it means for strengthening democracy across West Africa, the example that Nigeria would set if those elections go well would be positive.

If there is violence, and the elections, if there is violence associated with those elections, the implications of that as well in the region could be far-reaching.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

If I may, I'd like to go to Commissioner Stephen Schneck for comments and questions.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Chair  
Turler.

I have two questions. The first question I'd like to address to Mr. Ogbudu. Mr. Ogbudu, you mentioned as a proposed step in the right direction an effort to train local faith leaders and local leaders in conflict resolution.

And I'm curious what that program would look like. Could you, would you say a few words about how that might be shaped?

MR. OGBUDU: Thank you very much,  
Commissioner Stephen.

I would like to say the recommendation given to train religious leaders and local leaders, we discovered that in this part of the country, a lot of people listening to their religious leaders a lot, and also the local leaders are very close to the people, and where the presence of the state is not there, those people rely on their local leaders to help in resolving disputes.

And you already have a local structure,  
conflict mitigation structure in the community, where

people identify certain local leaders or religious leaders that they meet where they've already had issues.

On our program, which is a community initiative to promote peace, are funded by USAID.

It's a five-year program to mitigate violent conflict in northern Nigeria by three in the north central, three states in the north central, and three states in the northwest.

We train local leaders and giving them the capacity where they will be able to manage disputes that are in their communities. So we select local leaders, ranging from community leaders, youth leaders, women leaders, opinion leaders, to make sure that they have the mitigation and negotiation skills such that when people come to meet them, they will be able to resolve this dispute.

So in the situation where these people have their capacity and the local structure has been strengthened, it will help to minimize a lot of conflicts that escalate from maybe just some words from people. Like also strengthening the

early warning, early response system because we have people that we call the community peace observers.

These community peace observers have been trained in making sure that they take note of some signals of violent trends that are going on in the community so that they will be able to report it to the respective authorities so that these authorities now will be able to take, will be able to respond on time before these violent issues or the trend of signals escalate into violent conflict.

So if our local leaders and religious leaders, their capacity has been strengthened in mitigation and negotiation, they will have the capacity to be able to mediate any type of dispute that is brought before them.

Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you. Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Because of time, I won't examine this too much. I very much applaud

the idea of efforts to develop civil society within Nigeria, and I think the focusing on faith leaders is a particularly effective way to do that.

And if could say very briefly, I think this dovetails pretty well with Ms. Onubogu's suggestion to focus on the youthful population. So I'll leave it at that.

Thank you, Chair Turkel.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Commissioner Schneck.

If I may go to Commission Ueland next.

COMMISSIONER UELAND: Thank you very much, Chairman.

Appreciate very much today our witnesses. They've provided a lot of great information to consider for all of us here at USCIRF. So thank you very much for your time with us today.

Two quick questions in the interest of time. One, I'm curious, from any of our witnesses, and thank you very much for bringing up the issue of impunity this morning at our hearing, I'm curious as well as to whether or not there has been

any government complicity in some of these instances of violence here, especially in the past couple of years?

And, then, second, I'd also like any witness to give us a thought, if, as some of the presentations this morning have attempted to make clear, a lot of this violence is not religiously motivated, why is it the case that many of the victims inside Nigeria with whom at least I've had a chance to speak to believe that part of the motivation for the violence against them is indeed religiously grounded?

Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you. Thank you.

I'd now like to ask Commissioner David Curry to comment and ask questions.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you very much, chair, and thank you to the witnesses for your feedback.

It's sort of building on Eric's, Commissioner Ueland's question. I suppose I'm particularly interested in Mr. Barnett's answer or

Mr. Ogbudu.

When you refer to regional conflicts like the Fulani and so forth, in many cases I'm aware of, they claim an ideology is driving them, a theology of sorts.

So when I hear comments that it's not religiously motivated, and the people on the ground think it is, is it the case that they're stating an ideology?

I mean that's the feedback I've been getting that they say they believe that Christians are apostates or infidels and likewise moderate Muslims who don't believe in their extreme versions of ideology are targets and justified targets.

So maybe you could comment on that as it relates to some of your observations.

MR. BARNETT: Thank you.

I can—can people hear me? I can take a stab at that initially.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Sure.

MR. BARNETT: Okay. Thank you.

I'll keep my camera off to conserve

bandwidth. It's a bit fickle here in Dakar.

Sorry.

I think I can talk most clearly to kind of the northwestern. [?] can speak more north central. You know to the extent that the bandits, and that's the term that we're kind of using for predominantly Fulani militant, you know, criminal groups in the northwest, to the extent that they have an ideology, you know, I've found kind of in all my research, that they really don't talk about religion.

What they talk about is ethnicity, and so it's very true, especially, you know, [?] it can be very kind of [?]. They're trying to kick the Fulani out of Nigeria. Well, we'll show, we're going to take over. We're going to do this.

And I think it's important to keep in mind that sometimes this rhetoric can kind of verge on taunting. So, for example, I've heard recordings of bandits, you know, telling people, telling people that they've abducted or talking to the families of them saying, ah, yes, you know, I'm

Boko Haram. We're going to be in Abuja soon.  
We're going to be in Lagos soon.

But you find out that the bandit who did this is just some teenager. He doesn't know anything about Boko Haram.

Famously, the Kankara abduction, the abduction of over 300 school children in Katsina state in December 2020, which was claimed by Abubakar Shekau and the Boko Haram group, as my colleagues and I showed in our study by actually interviewing key [?], the kidnapping was actually carried out by a bandit who decided that he would get a higher ransom payment if he allowed Boko Haram to claim the attack because the government would be more concerned and more scared about Boko Haram terrorism than about, you know, some Fulani militia in Katsina state.

And so sometimes what we've seen is that the bandits will kind of use this appearance of a religious or a radical ideology in terms of, as a way to kind of inflate their stature.

You know one thing I'll say to kind of the

broader point, I believe it was Commissioner Eric, Commissioner Ueland's, you know, the truth is that I don't begrudge anyone, particularly, at least someone who is a religious minority, you know, in the Nigerian state for kind of fearing that there is a conspiracy here.

I don't need to go into all the history, but, of course, there is a very fraught history, particularly in these Middle Belt states, over kind of the question of whether these communities would be more, quote-unquote, "the South," or quote-unquote, the "North."

And so there's a lot of history here that you have to kind of be aware of, and so I don't begrudge anyone for feeling, especially when there is such, like there's such a high-level kind of state failure, and it's repeated, [?] a conspiracy.

With that said, you know, when you go and you look at the research and you compare communities, the picture that's painted is more that this is kind of [?] and violence across the board rather than at one particular community.

You know, just to conclude very quickly, I'll say that in the northwest as well, you will hear victims who will say, ah, we Hausa are being persecuted more than anyone else, and then the Fulani will say, ah, we Fulani are being persecuted more than anyone else.

They're not even talking about the violence happening in, say, northern Plateau state between Iraqua [ph] and Fulani or whatever. So I think there is often a sense of victimhood in each community that's not necessarily wrong, but it doesn't give you the whole picture.

Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Now I'd like to recognize Commissioner Fred Davie for comments and questions possibly.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Thank you, Chair Turkel.

Just a quick comment to say that I definitely appreciate the analysis that suggests that perhaps a lot of what's going on is not

necessarily religiously motivated violence, but violence that's rooted more in ideology and in some cases just kind of day-to-day survival, particularly when it comes to the bandits and maybe some others.

But that said, there is still a profound perception, at least among the Christian leaders I spoke with there, that there is a concerted effort with the government being implicit, to inflict harm if not to try to eradicate the presence and the strength of Christianity in Nigeria.

So I want to emphasize it because if you have major leaders who have that perception and feel like that's real, then it's a serious issue for the government and others and this Commission, as well as the U.S. government, to address.

So I want to put a pin and mark that as a serious issue.

My question would be—and the speakers can also comment on that statement. But my question would be we've recommended, USCIRF has recommended, in addition to CCP status, the appointment of a, of

a special envoy to the region. Let's say Lake Chad region for the sake of our discussion today. And I'd be curious as to what our speakers think about that recommendation?

And I want to thank each of them for their contributions today.

Thank you, Chair Turkel.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

MS. ONUBOGU: Thank you, Commissioner Davie.

I'm going to respond—my response will touch a little bit on the question that Commissioner Eric had as well on government complicity in the ongoing issues in Nigeria.

I can't necessarily speak to government complicity in any of these issues, but I think as we see conversations ongoing, increased insecurity in Nigeria over time has led to ongoing debates on whether Nigeria, as Commissioner Wolf mentioned, Nigeria is a failed state or not a failed state?

I think going beyond those labels, I think it's important for us to think about the state

failure in Nigeria over time and how political actors may have benefited from a system that works for a few and leaves out a majority.

And if you'd been able to engage in this system over time without consequences, you have individuals that continue to perpetrate a system that works for the few and leaves out the majority.

I think as we look across every part of Nigeria today, beyond the north, going into the southern parts of the country, there are pockets of violence in every part, in every region of Nigeria.

Groups and communities feel levels of frustration or grievances across every part of Nigeria, and I think this is something that is pertinent for us to keep in mind, that as we engage in these communities, it's important for peacebuilding efforts to understand why some of these communities are aggrieved and also be able to help open a path for the Nigerian government to engage more effectively with these groups because from some of these groups with some of these grievances, these easily become breeding grounds

for extremist ideas.

And I think for a first time, we're seeing in Nigeria that there are grievances in every single part of the country.

As we go into 2023, religion or actually religion always plays a key, always has a key point of conversations around elections in Nigeria, but more so with these elections as we go into 2023, as we've seen the major political or the incumbent political party field two candidates from the same religious background.

That in itself is raising conversations which also puts into perspective the fragility that exists within the Nigerian environment, that discussions rather than discussions being on the broader issues, that political actors or those who seek to foment violence or disrupt the system are narrowing some of these conversations down to religion.

So it also shows how religion and discussions around religion could be used as tools to motivate violence.

Needless to say, as I mentioned in my testimony, there are conflicts, and there is violence in Nigeria.

It's important for us to understand that there is violence in Nigeria that can be exclusively attributed to religion. There is also violence in Nigeria where it's important for us to understand when religion is just used as a tool to, as a tool to motivate destruction or to motivate crisis.

So for us, being able to understand and differentiate between the two of them enables and helps inform our approach and ensure that we're not creating more damage in the system but actually trying to address the situation, addressing the situation because at the end of the day, while the responsibility to address these issues rests on the Nigerian state, the brunt, those who have to shoulder the brunt of these crises are the Nigerian people at the end of the day.

So it's important for us to understand how these different conflicts manifest and ensure that

that helps to inform our discuss and also help inform how the U.S. government engages in the region.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

We're getting close to the end of this hearing. I'd like to give the commissioners another chance if any of you would like to ask follow-up questions or make additional comments? Please.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Chair Turkel, very quickly. I'm really impressed by the diversity of opinion we've heard today. The technological end of things could have been a lot better, and if we can just ask from the people who reported from Africa, if they can perhaps give us some additional or expand on their written testimony because the information perspective from better engagement with religious leaders to a better understanding of the terrorist actors really crucial information for all of us and for the broader civil society NGO community to know about.

So if we can prevail on the witnesses to

expand in writing and for that information to be fully presented on our website, I think that would be really helpful across the board.

CHAIR TURKEL: Anyone else have comments, additional follow-up questions?

If not, I'd like to ask our panelists to share any final thoughts helping us to conclude today's hearing.

MR. OGBUDU: Okay. Thank you very much.

I would like to add these data from our findings. We discovered that inter-religious violence has been perpetrated by both and on both Muslims and Christians, and Christians appear to have suffered more attacks on revenge and likely as a result even more likely to report feeling victimized.

In the majority of Muslim and Christian respondents said that people of both faiths are responsible for violence in their area as opposed to pinning blame solely on one side.

So I would like to stress that many of those conversations in which these conflicts are

framed as purely inter-religious, they occur at the national and international level and become politicized, but that does not necessarily and massively affect the specific community-level conflict dynamics.

That is why we see the—that is why we see that despite the narrative in national media, most community members across religious divides decline to attribute the culpability for the conflicts to one side and are citing other drivers of conflict as more instrumental.

Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

Ms. Onubogu.

MS. ONUBOGU: Thank you very much,  
Chairman.

I just wanted to say thank you again for the opportunity to testify and to stress one of the recommendations that I had on the focus on, focusing on accountable governance in Nigeria.

I think over time we have seen conflicts emerge in Nigeria and Nigeria move from one

conflict to another, and these conflicts manifest themselves in different ways across the country.

For us to be able to ensure that we get to the root causes of these conflicts, it is important that we focus on strengthening those institutions of governance that can lead to the sustainable change that we hope and we wish to see.

And hopefully as we move towards the elections in 2023, this provides an opportunity for the U.S. government to have more timely focus and consistent support towards those elections because not only the elections themselves but whoever emerges as president of Nigeria will be governing a country that is dealing with multiple challenges, multiple security challenges, and how we engage with the government that emerges after the elections is also important.

So thank you again for this opportunity to testify.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

Any other witnesses wanted to go ahead, please.

MR. BARNETT: Yes. Thank you very much, Chair Turkel. And, yes, thank you.

I'd like to echo what both of my fellow witnesses have said, and I think this is related to Commissioner Davie's last point, which I think he got to kind of the crux of the matter, and one of the big challenges is that these narratives, they exist in Nigeria and they're very sincerely held.

And, you know, the people that aren't, they have their reasons for believing them. As, you know, as Ms. Onubogu mentioned, the people feel victimized in every community, and they have reasons for feeling that.

And I think that it's important to recognize that it can be kind of sincere and based in some reality but also not capture the full nuances of this country, and I think so I would just like to end by pointing out or by kind of reminding the Commission and everyone that Nigeria is a very complex country, and that often this violence rooted in local causes is kind of swept up in these larger national narratives.

And so I think that one of the things that the Commission has done, such as sending delegations to Nigeria to hear from different stakeholders, is very important because it's important to understand the local nuances of each of these challenges that Nigeria faces and then to see how each of these local challenges is both, as the other witnesses noted, these local challenges are rooted in some of the same kind of structural problems.

And they also feed into some of the same narratives and beliefs and perceptions about Nigeria as a failed state or something like that.

So I think that understanding that the connection between local nuance and the national discourse and the national factors is crucial.

Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

Anyone else?

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: I'm going to just thank Mr. Barnett for meeting with us while we were there.

He provided us a lot of valuable information during the delegation's visit to Nigeria so I want to thank him for that.

And also to say that he's produced in addition to the material we got today some other analysis that was shared while we were in Nigeria, and I commend that to my fellow commissioners.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

This hearing is coming to an end. Before we close, I wanted to thank our witnesses for coming to testify, sharing their expertise, and I'm grateful for the compelling testimonies that our witnesses provided today, educating us and also those in the policy circle in our government to do the right thing. Call it what it is.

I also wanted to thank the commissioners who participated in today's hearing, taking the time from their busy schedule.

I'm particularly grateful for our two commissioners based in California starting so early to be able to join us in this hearing.

And I can't miss this opportunity to thank

our professional staff team, policy experts, and the communications team for their hard work to arrange today's hearing.

I also wanted to apologize to the audience for the technical difficulties that we experienced.

And finally I wanted to reiterate our position. This is a bipartisan Commission. Those of you who are tuning in may have noticed that even despite the fact that the commissioners being appointed by different political parties, we are laser focused in our effort to educate the public about religious persecution in various parts of the world.

We also are strong advocates for principled foreign policy including religious freedom, human rights concerns so that we could continue to be moral leader in the world, lending our voices to those millions of voiceless people around the world.

And as we have been consistently recommending, State Department should designate Nigeria as a country of particular concern for

engaging and tolerating systematic ongoing egregious religious freedom violations.

We also call on the U.S. government to appoint a special envoy so that we will have a full-time professional leader to stop the human rights abuses, religious persecution in Nigeria.

As Commissioner Frank Wolf often says, we need to continue to be truth teller and that's what we are doing today with this hearing.

With that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:07 p.m. ET, the hearing was adjourned.]